

LOCAL NEWS

LA County deputy shootings sink to lowest number seen in decades, agency says. This could be why



Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG

In this Nov. 2017 file photo, deputies search for possible additional suspects after a deputy-involved shooting in Newhall that left one sheriff's deputy wounded. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies fired their guns at suspects in 22 incidents last year — the lowest number of deputy-involved shootings since at least “the mid-1990s,” according to the agency.

The average number of deputy-involved shootings at the nation's largest sheriff's department was about 37.5 per year between 2007-2017, according to Sheriff's Department data.

“Any shooting is a shooting that we, of course, prefer not to have happened but this points to the level of training going on in the Sheriff's Department lately,” said Brian Williams, executive director of the Sheriff Civilian Oversight Commission, an advisory board appointed by the L.A. County Board of Supervisors in late 2016.

“We're excited to see the number drop and we'd like it to drop even more.”



People gather around a memorial for a 16-year old boy fatally shot at an apartment complex courtyard during a police chase in South Los Angeles, Monday, Feb. 5, 2018. Los Angeles County sheriff's officials say deputies fatally shot the boy they believed to be armed during a foot chase on Sunday night. KABC-TV reports Monday that investigators did not immediately recover a suspect weapon. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

The department has had several deputy-involved shootings so far this year. And the oversight commission was set to have an emergency town hall on Wednesday night, Feb. 7, at New Congregational Missionary Baptist Church to discuss one of them that left a [16-year old dead in South Los Angeles' Westmont](#) community.

That shooting sparked an immediate outcry from dozens of residents in the area. The Sheriff's Department said that while no gun was recovered from the teen, they

believe someone may have taken one from him.

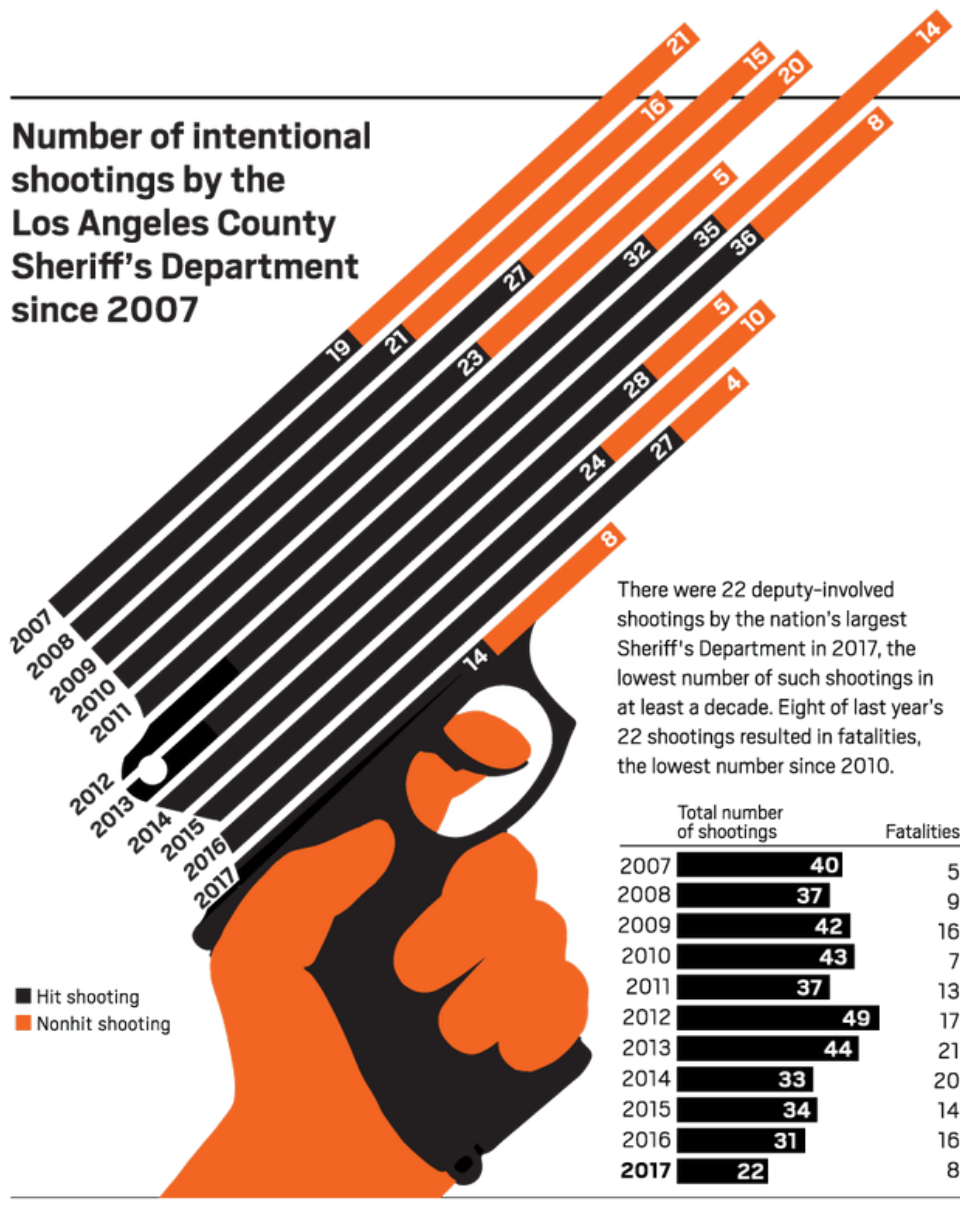
Fourteen of last year's shootings by deputies resulted in an individual being struck by gunfire. Eight incidents were “non-hit” shootings or misses, according to the data, which looked at the number of intentional shooting incidents by deputies. (Nearly all of the suspects were armed with some kind of weapon at the time of the shootings.)

Eight people were killed in last year's deputy-involved shootings, which is down from 16 killed the previous year and is the lowest number of fatalities since 2010.

Undersheriff Jacques "Anthony" La Berge said in a brief interview that there are "any number of reasons" for the decrease.

"We'd like to think that it's because of a lot of accountability and oversight (procedures) that we've put in place" in recent years, he said. "We've put new processes in place to monitor and evaluate every shooting at a much sooner time."

The undersheriff added that the department has also increased training on tactics while holding deputies accountable for poor tactics.



Source: L.A. County Sheriff's Department PAUL PENZELLA — SCNG

Within the last five years, the department has implemented a [Critical Incident Review Panel](#), made up of three commanders, that reviews deputy-involved shootings, in-custody deaths and other critical incidents on a weekly basis, said Chief Karyn Mannis, who heads the department's Professional Standards and Training Division.

The panel identifies any issues that need to be addressed immediately, such as with employee training, policy or equipment, in an effort to reduce risk of liability. In the past, the department had to wait for the department's Executive Force Review Committee to make such recommendations, which are usually released a year after the incident.

“That’s why the (Critical Incident Review Panel) is so valuable. They can say, ‘we’ve identified some training issues here; let’s get the deputy to training right away,’” Mannis said.

The creation of the Office of Inspector General, which acts as a watchdog of the department, and the addition of two Constitutional policing advisers, who advise the sheriff, have also added extra layers of oversight and review in recent years, she said.

However, there is still some unpredictability with deputy-involved shootings because of the unique circumstances of each incident, Mannis noted. Among them is the type and severity of the crime, the time of day it occurred, whether the suspect was armed or believed to be and the suspect’s behavior.

“We evaluate all those factors and more when we evaluate a shooting in order to better understand the root causes and fine tune our training,” she said.

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people aren’t just going to look the other way when people are shot the way they were used to.”

— *Joe Domanick, assistant director of CUNY*

Ron Hernandez, president of the Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs, echoed the sentiment that each shooting has unique circumstances. Thus, he said, it's hard to say why there are fluctuations.

But he argued that the department's shortage of deputies — which he said translates to as many as 1,500 unfilled positions in their budget — could have a bearing on that number. (The Sheriff's Department says there are currently about 565 vacancies of sworn personnel after it "adjusted" about 900 positions that were available, mainly by freezing them.)

"If you don't have time to go out here and do proactive police work, you're less likely to end up in a situation where you might have to use some kind of force or deadly force," Hernandez said.

Inspector General Max Huntsman called it "very promising" that deputy-involved shootings are down. He noted a particular decrease since reform efforts began in earnest following Sheriff Lee Baca's announcement in early 2014 that he would not seek re-election.

But Huntsman, who was speaking at a recent Sheriff Civilian Oversight Commission meeting, noted that "force covers a lot more than shootings and the real question is the appropriateness or inappropriateness of it."

It's a difficult question because the Sheriff's Department will often have a different opinion than community members. It all has to be based on "good investigation," he added.

Huntsman said he has requested detailed information on use of force from the Sheriff's Department, which will be given to the civilian oversight commission for their examination.

The oversight commission has a use of force/body camera policy ad-hoc committee, which is gearing up to examine the department's policies on these issues in the coming months.

Among the issues to be examined are the department's policy on body cameras, which can affect how and whether a deputy uses force, the instances deputies are allowed to use certain types of force, and where abuses have occurred, said Williams, of the oversight commission.

"We're looking at multiple aspects of use of force, whether it's deadly, or use of a baton or a Taser, or use of pepper spray," he said. It will be up to the sheriff to determine whether he wants to accept the panel's recommendations.

Joe Domanick, associate director of The Center on Media, Crime and Justice at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York (CUNY), noted that populations in general have become less violent in recent decades, which could affect the number of officer-involved shootings.



This Sept. 22, 2014 file photo shows a body camera on the uniform of a Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputy at department headquarters in Monterey Park. (AP Photo/ Nick Ut, File)

In addition, several law enforcement agencies around the country “took it to heart” after several high-profile deaths. They include Michael Brown, an unarmed teen and robbery suspect fatally shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri, in August of 2014, and Eric Garner in New York City, who died in December of 2017 after officers there put him in a chokehold.

“(Agencies) are aware that so many other things are changing — people aren’t just going to look the other way when people are shot the way they were used to,” Domanick said.

Erroll Southers, director of USC’s Safe Communities Institute, said he too is optimistic that law enforcement agencies’ emphasis on conflict resolution, mediation, dealing with special populations — including the mentally ill — are factors in the decrease.

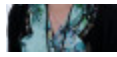
But he noted that crime ebbs and flows and sometimes departments are unfairly criticized for increases that are not necessarily under their control.

“While we are pleased about this outcome, we shouldn’t jump to a conclusion should this trend change next year in the reverse,” he said.

Tags: **Data**, **LA news**, **public safety**, **Top Stories LADN**



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Brenda Gazzar is a multilingual multimedia reporter who has worked for a variety of news outlets in California and in the Middle East since 2000. She has covered a range of issues, including breaking news, immigration, law and order, race, religion and gender issues, politics, human interest stories and education. Besides the Los Angeles Daily News and its sister papers, her work has been published by Reuters, the Denver Post, Ms. Magazine, the Jerusalem Post, USA Today, the Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Jewish Journal, The Cairo Times and others. Brenda speaks Spanish, Hebrew and intermediate Arabic and is the recipient of national, state and regional awards, including a National Headliners Award and one from the Associated Press News Executives' Council. She holds a dual master's degree in Communications/Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

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